The Sutra on The Full Awareness Of Breathing.

Dear Sangha, today is the 22nd of January 1998 and we are in the New Hamlet in our winter retreat. We will continue on the Sutra on The Full Awareness Of Breathing.

We noted that the first four breaths have body as object, the four next have feelings as object. The master Buddhaghosa, the author of the Vasuddhimagha treatise, has said that these 4 have to do with feelings and perceptions. But in fact they are only concerning feelings. Even if feelings are connected to form and perception, we have to say clearly that these four breaths are concerned only with feeling. The five aggregates; form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, we usually represent as a tangerine with five sections. We noted that form is our body, our feelings can arise from our body or they can arise from our perceptions. Sometimes when we have headache, the headache phenomena belongs to our body, or the stomachache. A headache or a stomachache gives us a feeling, a painful feeling. When we put on warm clothes and we can have enough to eat, we don't have hunger and cold, so we have a pleasant feeling which comes from the body. So looking after the body is looking after having pleasant feelings.

And the same is true with perceptions. If we look after perceptions, we shall reduce our painful feelings which come from perceptions. When we have wrong perceptions, we suffer, and just as our body. So our perceptions are the root of countless feelings: anger, sadness, fear, worry, desires. All come from wrong perceptions. Therefore, from the foundations of wrong perceptions come countless feelings. Therefore, we can say that feelings are related both to body and to perceptions. But they are still feelings. The second four breathings are related to feelings. Feelings are their object. And feelings are related to body and perceptions. But we have to say quite clearly that the object of the second four breathings is feelings. And we can not say as Buddhaghssa (an ancient Buddhist commentator) that the object of the second four breathings are perceptions and feelings. That's because Thay has put 4, 5, 6, 7, he meant to put 5, 6, 7, 8. On the white board.

And the first four breathings relate to the object of body. The first two talk about breathing and three and four talk about our whole body. And we know that the breathing, here, is part of the body's functions… seen as the body's functions. We have to remember that the first breathing 'Breathing in I know I'm breathing in. Breathing out I know I'm breathing out.' 'Breathing in I know this is an in-breath. Breathing out I know this is an out-breath.' And the second breathing, I know whether it's long or whether it's short. 'Breathing in I know whether it's long or it's short. Breathing out I know whether this breath is long or short.' And long and short isn't just an idea or a phrase, it is a reality. Just as long as my breath is, I know it is that long. Just as long as my out-breath is, I know it is that long. Because actually the in-breath can be short and the out-breath can be longer. Especially when we begin to practice our out-breath is usually longer than our in-breath. Therefore the first breath is to recognize that this is an out-breath or an in-breath. The second exercise is to see how long or how short is the in-breath or the out-breath. We don't have to say how many seconds or how many meters long it is, we just have to be aware of it, all throughout it's duration. We begin and we are aware of its length, we keep our mind to that breathing the whole time. We begin at the beginning and we keep our mind with the breath the whole time. Like the pen I'm holding represents the breathing and my finger represents mindfulness. So mindfulness has to follow closely the breath from the beginning until the end. If mindfulness half way along becomes separated from the breath, then mindfulness will have another object, it won't be this breathing anymore. Breathing in I know I'm breathing in … oh, I forgot, I didn't turn out the light in my room. And we lose our breath and we follow the image of the light, which hasn't been switched off. Mindfulness is not following recollections... it's not following the breath, it's following another object and so there isn't any concentration and our mindfulness awareness is not successful. We have to hold closely to the breath the whole time, from the beginning to the end. Then we know that this breath is long, or exactly how long it is. We know, we just know, because we are mindful. … and when we breathe out, it is the same. We hold closely to our breath until it comes to an end. The practitioner who begins the practice has to grasp firmly… has to master these first two breathings.

There are people who can not do it at first and the teachers will tell them they should count their breathing, one in-breath, one out-breath. Then we count two at the second in-breath and out-breath. So you can say breath 'in one', 'out one', 'in two', 'out two', 'in three', 'out three'. And if we get to ten, then we begin to get back down, go backwards down to 'one' again. People whose minds are very distracted use this way in order to make their mind concentrated. But counting the breath is not mentioned by the Buddha. So let's only talk about being aware of the breath. Sometimes people call this sutra a counting the breath sutra, but that is not correct. Counting the breath is not mentioned in this sutra and the method of counting the breath is one that evolved after the time of the Buddha. As far as the original teachings of the Buddha are concerned, it's not counting the breath but following the breath. And in the spirit of the original Buddhism following the breath is the more correct way of practice than counting the breath. But counting the breath has its benefits for people who just began the practice. Like children, for instance, you can have them count their breath from one to ten. And if they forget what number they got to, half way along, they have to start again from number one. And then go backwards 'ten, nine, eight, seven' and if you forget half way along then you have to go back to ten and start again. When we become less distracted, we can abandon the counting and just follow our breathing. We abandon the counting and continue with following the breath.

The third breathing connected with the body is awareness of the body, of the body formations. 'Breathing in I know I am aware of my whole body.' That is, I am embracing my whole body with my awareness. 'Breathing in I am aware of my whole body.' That is, we embrace our whole body with our awareness, with our mindfulness. The fourth one is calming, pacifying the body formations. 'Breathing in I calm the formations of my body.' Hanh in Vietnamese, formations, means the phenomena of the body. This phenomenon is called the body. In English we say 'formations'. (Thay in English:) 'Breathing in I am aware of my physical formation. Breathing out I calm my physical formation.' Physical formation means our body. Because everything in life has been formed by causes and conditions, like a flower. It's a formation, brought about by elements such as water, fire, earth, seeds, rain, manure. These things come together to make a formation, a phenomenon which we call samskara. This is the body samskara, not the mind samskara. All formations, all phenomena are impermanent. They do not last forever. Therefore it's said that all formations are impermanent. Our body is a formation called the physical formation. And our anger is a formation called a mental formation. All these formations are impermanent. 'Formation' is a classical term, a technical term, a specialist term for Buddhism, meaning a phenomenon. … kaya samskara means a physical formation. Because samskara also means a collection of many elements and our body is like that. So if we are aware of our physical formation it means I am aware of my body as a phenomenon. It's very good, very interesting. We use the word formation. We see very clearly that the thing we are talking about is a collection of many elements and we see that it is because of this it is constantly in the process of change.

When we get to the fourth breathing we see that our body is pacified, is calmed, we can see that our body is agitated, is trembling. So we put that aside and we calm our body. That is our practice. When we are practicing total relaxation… total relaxation is developed from this fourth breathing which is called 'Calming the physical formation'. What it does for us is to make us feel well, light and leave our stress behind. Usually we practice total relaxation when we are lying down, but these four breathings can be practiced when we are sitting or when we are standing also, not only when we are lying down. When we are lying down it may be easier to practice. But the only problem is that we can fall asleep when we lie down or we are beginning to snore after five minutes. But if we are sitting we are less likely to fall asleep, we can practice maybe half an hour or an hour, we won't feel sleepy. Therefore, when we hear the sound of the bell or hear the sound of a bird singing or see the sun rising, anything which reminds us, we have to depend on that in order to practice these first four breaths: 'Breathing in I know I'm breathing in. Breathing in I know it's long or short. Breathing in and out I am aware of my physical formation. Breathing in and out I calm my physical formation.' Because the sound of the bell, the sound of birds singing are all opportunities for us to return to our breathing. Therefore in the Sukhavati realm, the trees make a wonderful sound when the wind blows in them and that is what tells us about

the different teachings of the Dharma. When we hear the sound of the breeze in the pine trees and we are mindful, we can be aware of our body, we can calm our body and that is hearing Dharma teachings coming from the trees, from the wind and we can be in touch straight away with the Pure Land, the Sukhavati realm. And if we cannot be in touch with the Pure Land now, when we pass away we will not be able to be in touch with it. So the question is not whether we are here or there, the question is can we do it or not.

The fifth breathing is awareness of joy, the sixth is awareness of happiness, the seventh is awareness of the mental formation, meaning the feelings – and we have to remember here that mental formation means just feelings here. The eighth is calming the mental formation, calming the feelings. I'm breathing in and I feel happy, I feel joyful. This is the fruit, the joy of meditation, which nourishes us. A French woman wrote to me. She is thirty-two years old, she says, and she has a small baby and her whole family is practicing together. "I haven't been to Plum Village but I have read the book published by Albin Michel and when I started to practice, I I read 'Breathe, you are alive' … and as soon as I put it into practice, I saw that it was effective. I saw that you only need to breathe to be happy, you only have to be mindful of your breathing and you can be happy. And this is based on my experience, not coming from a book. Whenever she comes back to her breathing she feels happy and wide, because returning to our mindful breathing we are in touch with the conditions of happiness which are present around us. For instance we are young, we have work, we have a house to live in, we have security, we have the blue sky, we have the white clouds and whenever we return like that to our breathing. Thanks that to our breathing, we are in touch with the conditions of happiness which are there.

It shows us quite clearly that when we are aware of joy, which is not a repetition of words, autosuggestion, and we don't say I'm feeling joy when I don't feel joyful – this is real joy! It's the joy of awareness… the awareness which brings us joy. There are so many things for us to be joyful about. So we only have the capacity to recognize that we can be happy, we can be happy. There are people who cannot recognize their capacity to be happy. So they trample on their happiness and they break up their happiness at every moment, because they are not capable to recognize the conditions around them which can make them happy. We wake up, for example, we breathe and we see something wonderful. Ah, I am awake, I am alive! I have twenty-four hours to live. Oh, my mother is here. My mother is still alive or my father is still alive, or the person I love is still alive. I don't have backache… things like this. There are so many of them. And if we haven't got this … then we have got that. There are only people who are ignorant, who cannot see that we have the conditions for happiness. Only the ignorant think that they only have the conditions for suffering. Therefore, breathing in means to have the opportunity to be in touch with those good fortunes we have, the wonderful conditions we have. And once we are in touch with them we will have joy and then we will have happiness.

Maybe we are obstructed by something and we cannot be in touch with the conditions for happiness. We are obstructed by something which is produced by our own mind. Therefore, there are so many conditions for happiness but we are not able to appreciate any of them. And when that happens we should go to our teacher and our spiritual friends and ask for help to remove that obstruction. 'Breathing in I feel joyful' is a practice which we should do every day. We are already happy and we practice it and we will be happier. And if we are not yet happy and then we practice it in order to begin to be happy. And when we hear the bell, we return to our self and we begin to prepare to breathe in. And when we are breathing in, we make the feeling of joy arise. Breathing in I know that my teacher is alive. I am near to my teacher. And I feel joyful, and I feel happy because of that. Breathing out I am being looked after by the sangha and that makes me feel happy immediately. Breathing in I am beginning a new day with practice and that gives me a feeling of joy and happiness straight away.

[sound of the bell]

And joy gives rise to happiness, leads to happiness. Breathing in, in touch with the conditions of joy, I feel joy. Breathing out I embrace that joy and so in really touching that joy it becomes happiness. First of all we see the water and we are thirsty and we feel joy. Then we can pour the water to drink and drink it. That is happiness. The joy has to lead on to happiness. And this joy and happiness function is to nourish us, not to bring about suffering for us. These are the wholesome joy and happiness, not the joy and happiness of sensual desire, like the joy of sex or the joy of possessions, the joy of food. We hear the sound of the bell, we return to our breathing. We breathe in and with our capacity to be in touch with one of the conditions or many of the conditions of happiness our in-breath gives rise to the feeling of joy. We can nourish that joy as we breathe out or we make the feeling of peace and joy arise as soon as we breathe out. Breathing in we have joy, breathing out we have happiness. Or breathing in we have joy, breathing out we have joy. Breathing in we are happy, breathing out we are happy. So the sound of the bell should bring us both joy and happiness. This is the practice of joy and happiness. It is not autosuggestion. If we just imagine we are happy when we are not happy or imagine we are joyful when we are not joyful that is not the correct practice. When we read these details in the sutra we see that what the Buddha told is nothing… there is nothing weary of life in that. The Buddha taught that joy is real, peace is real, happiness is real and our practice is to nourish us with these things. We practice and we ask our brothers and sisters how they practice. So we can learn from other people's experience and every day our practice will increase, will get better.

We know that joy is a feeling, happiness is a feeling and the feelings here, the mental formations here are also feelings of which we are aware. Breathing in I am aware of the feeling which is present. Breathing in I am aware of the feeling that's now in me, whatever the feeling is, whether it's pleasant, painful or neither pleasant nor painful. It is to recognize the feeling. To recognize the mental formation is to recognize the feeling, the feeling which is in me at the moment. We know that feelings are a river. In our person there are five rivers. The river of the body, the river of the feelings, of the perceptions, of the mental formations and of the consciousness. Our body is a river. It is a formation, which is constantly changing, and each cell in the body is a drop of water and that drop of water is born and dies. Each cell in our body is constantly being born and dying, all cells in our body are constantly being born and dying. So we should learn how to look at our body, as a river which is constantly changing, being born and dying. And we should also learn how to look at our feelings as a river. These feelings arise, they endure and then they disappear. And each feeling is a drop of water in a river of feelings. And the seventh breathing is teaching us to look at the feeling, to recognize the feeling which happens to be present, whatever it is.

And the eighth breathing is to calm that feeling. That feeling, even if it is a feeling of joy, we need to keep it calm. Because in joy there is excitement and we have to calm that excitement. In happiness we can also calm our happiness. And if it is a painful feeling which comes from our worry, our anger, our jealousy, our despair we really need to recognize it and embrace it and this eighth breathing is to make it calm, calm down like a child which has a tummyache. We recognize that this child has a tummyache and we hold the child and we calm the child down. To recognize the feelings and to calm the feelings is the seventh and the eighth breathing. A practitioner has to know how to do this. You shouldn't just wait for these things to kill you. You should not allow your feelings to destroy your body and your mind. A practitioner, whenever they have a feeling, especially a feeling of suffering they should know how to use the energy of mindfulness in order to embrace that feeling, like a mother embraces her baby. And say that, you should say that "I'm here, I'm here. Your mother is here, mother is here. So don't worry. We will look after you. We will embrace your suffering." Don't run away from it. And when you are able to embrace it, you use the method of breathing in and breathing out in order to calm it down. That is called 'Calming the mental formation', calming the feelings in other words. And we remind you one more time: these four breathings are to deal with our feelings, the object is only feelings… of these four breathings.

Now we are going on to the next four breathings, the ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth. These breathings belong to the field of mind. Here we should use the word Than, meaning kayo or body. And here we should use the word mind. Mind means, quite clearly, Mental formations. Feelings are a mental formation. We learn in the Buddhist psychology school that there are fifty-one mental formations and feelings are one of them. Perceptions are another. And we have left after that forty-nine mental formations. Therefore mind here is referring to forty-nine mental formations. You can put fifty-one if you like. It doesn't matter. Because this method can also be used for feelings and perceptions. … And we will see that the last four breathings, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen and sixteen... their object is phenomena. Dharma, here, means phenomena. So phenomena are one … perceptions belong to this field. And this field is to deal with our perceptions. Perceptions bring us a lot of suffering. If we can actually transform our perceptions, then we can transform all our suffering. In the mind section we have forty-nine mental formations, in the feeling

section we have one mental formation and in the phenomena section we have one mental formation, mainly perceptions and that makes out fifty-one all together.

In the Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness we have four terms, four fields of mindfulness. Mindfulness of body, feelings, mind and objects of mind. (Thay in English:) 'Contemplation of the body in the body, contemplation of the feelings in the feelings, contemplation of the mind in the mind, contemplation of the objects of the mind in the objects of the mind.' Here, dharma means the objects of mind. All the forty-nine mental formations have that object and technically it is called 'dharmas'. Dharmas are the object of perceptions. Dharmas are the object of mind. These four: body, feelings, perceptions and mind include all the five skandhas. So where does consciousness lie? As far as the sixteen breathings are concerned, consciousness, as far as I can see, is the earth which contains and stores all the seeds. And when the seeds manifest they become mental formations, fifty-one mental formations. Forty-nine belong to the mental formations section, one to the feelings and one to the perceptions. So the manifestation of consciousness can be found in three of the skandhas.

Consciousness is like a river. When we see all the drops of water, we can see the river. The manifestation is drops of water. When we can see the fifty-one mental formations, we can already see consciousness. We only meditate on what is manifested, how could we meditate on what is not manifest. So consciousness lies in mental formations, lies in perceptions, lies in the body and lies in feelings. Consciousness is the basis. Consciousness is the capacity to manifest and the other four skandhas are the actual manifestation. So consciousness is the basis of the other four skandhas and if we can see clearly the other four skandhas, then we can see consciousness. These fifty-one mental formations, as far as consciousness is concerned, are seeds. And when they manifest they are mental formations. So there isn't such a thing as consciousness outside of mental formations. Mental formations are consciousness and consciousness is mental formations. The four fields of mindfulness contain the five skandhas. Because all the drops of water in a river are the river. All the mental formations are the consciousness. If we know that we won't expect consciousness to be something different from mental formations. This is a new way of analysis, to help us to be able to see and to be able to bring the five skandhas into the practice of the Four Establishments of Mindfulness and see that they are the same thing, how the four… And if you haven't understood yet, you will understand, so don't worry.

The ninth breathing is gladdening the mind … which in fact means the mental formations, being aware of the mental formations is the ninth breathing and the tenth one is gladdening the mental formations. The eleventh one is concentrating the mental formations and the twelfth one is liberating the mental formations, liberating the mind. We ought to know that these are expressions, ancient terms, and we need to replace new terms in order to make the meaning clearer. We understand and breathing in … I am aware of the mental formation which is in me now. And this ninth breathing is different from the seventh breathing. So number seven is just for feelings and nine is for any other mental formation. Breathing in I am aware, I recognize the mental formation which is present in me now. Any mental formation, as long as it isn't feeling or perception. But we can also put feeling and perception in here if we want to. It doesn't really matter. The third river is the river of mental formations. Every wave we could say on the river is a mental formation anger, sadness, jealousy, and hatred. (Thay in English:) 'Breathing in I am aware of the mental formation that is in me.' That is we have to recognize and embrace it. And the tenth breathing is gladdening the mind. How can you make a mental formation in you more joyful? How can you make positive, wholesome mental formations arise?

This circular diagram symbolizes that inner store consciousness. If we draw a circle and we make it in two and what is underneath is store consciousness and what is on top is the mind consciousness. We know that the store stores all the seeds. When these seeds manifest they become a mental formation. Mental formation is the manifestation of the seed. When a seed manifests as a mental formation we need to be aware of it. And that is the fourth breathing. How do we practice the tenth? How can we make good mental formations appear in our mind consciousness? We have good seeds in us. How can we catch them and help them manifest? That is what is meant by gladdening the mind. You have the seed of joy, of happiness, of love, of forgiveness… and these good seeds have been handed down to us by our parents, by our teachers, by our patriarchs. And every day we help them to grow bigger and in this tenth breathing we try and touch them and allow them to manifest. Make them manifest as a mental formation. Because if we just let the seeds of sadness manifest and they will drown… they will take the whole space in our mind consciousness… and we won't have room in our mind consciousness for gladness.

Whenever we put on a nun's robe or monk's robe, we remember that we are a monk or a nun and we see that this life is beautiful and a happy life. And we can bring happiness to others as well and then our bodhicitta is naturally watered and touched. And we gladden our mind. We put our hand on our head and we feel our shaved head, we know that we are a monk or a nun. We see a younger brother or sister, when we are reciting the sutra, we feel glad. So there are many, many opportunities to be in touch with the good seeds in us. The seed of bodhicitta, the seed of love. And when just two or three good seeds manifest in our mind consciousness, we will have gladness. This is a practice we do every day. And we have to help these flowers to bloom, many times every day. That is gladdening the mind. And when those flowers have opened in our mind, our eyes open like flowers, our hands open like flowers and our steps are like flowers.

Yesterday in the Dharma discussion I said… in the hermitage there is a camellia tree and it's very beautiful. Now has it opened twelve flowers, very beautiful, very wonderful flowers. I have planted that camellia tree years ago. First it just had two flowers and they died very quickly because the plant wasn't used to being here. It hadn't put down many roots. The next year there were many buds but only a few flowers and they died quickly. But last year there were twelve flowers and they lasted a long time. When I look at that camellia tree, it's like a monk or a nun. In the first year they may not have put down their roots, so they don't get many flowers. In the second year it's better and in the third year they put down strong roots and are used to the customs of being a nun and give many, many beautiful flowers. All monks and nuns are like that. They all have fruits and flowers. If you practice properly, the flowers will open all the time not only in the spring. We can look at a monk or a nun and we can see them opening flowers every day. These flowers will bring happiness to many people. If you have confidence, if you have diligence, if you have mindfulness, if you have concentration, if you have wisdom, if you have happiness, if you have liberation when you think about the Buddha and Buddhism, you see you have a place of refuge. Whenever you look at the sangha, you feel joy and therefore you gladden your mind. Gladness manifests many times a day. So when walking, standing, talking, laughing is opening flowers for themselves and blooming flowers for others too. Some people open many flowers and some people's plants bloom with only a few. We should not feel inferior because we only have a few flowers. We know when we only have a few flowers, that all we need to do is to make our roots more strongly rooted in the soil and then quite naturally there will be more flowers and we will be able to help others and our own country. The duty of a monk or a nun is to bloom with flowers for the world.

That is the practice of gladdening the mind. When we see that that is what we are doing. As far as the camellia is concerned if it has not yet produced flowers we should be patient. We have to look after that camellia better, more. We should not blame, we should not be angry. Because a camellia will bloom. That is just because it hasn't managed to put down its roots yet that it hasn't. It's not the right time yet for it … that it hasn't given flowers. All of us must practice to help that. The earth must help that camellia to have the strength to bloom. Everyone has to help the plant to bloom.

[sound of the bell]

And when we come as far as this, we see the meaning of the four right efforts, the four skillful means of diligence. Diligence is one of the paramitas, one of the six paramitas. The first right effort is: the unwholesome seeds which have not yet manifested, do not let them manifest. When the unwholesome seeds have manifested, how do we help them to return to seed-form as soon as possible? For example, we hear some music that waters negative emotions in us, or we look at a film, which has violence, hatred and craving in it, we are helping the unwholesome seeds in us to arise. If we don't look at that kind of film, we do not listen to that kind of music, we help the seeds not to manifest. That is the first right effort: do not allow to manifest unwholesome seeds which have not yet manifested. The second thing is: the unwholesome seeds which have manifested, help them to go back to their seed-form. Do not allow them to remain a long time in your mind consciousness. How do we do that? We have the precepts, we have the Fine Manners , we have the Dharma doors of sitting and walking and reading the sutra. Those are the ways to help the

unwholesome seeds to go back to their seed-form. Because the longer they stay in mind consciousness, the stronger they will become in store consciousness … their root will become.

So we don't use the method of oppression, but we use the method of changing the peg. We take hold of our breathing, we invite a good seed to come into the mind consciousness. And when the good seed is already in our consciousness, the unwholesome seed will go back down. We can read some words in the sutra or we can read something our teacher or the Buddha has left for us. That will help us transform these things that have already manifested. The third thing is: the good seeds which have not yet manifested, how can we help them to manifest. That is the object of the tenth breath. Every day we have to allow these good seeds to sprout, as if it is the spring. And sometimes we will see a new flower… one flower… And then in the evening we see another flower. In the spring it's like that, the flowers are always coming up. That is why we call it spring. It means that the flowers are springing up from the earth. And we have to practice in such a way that we can allow the Dharma rain to fall on the seeds and the wholesome seeds will constantly be manifesting. So the third right effort is: the wholesome seeds which have not yet manifested, to help them manifest. The fourth right effort is: once the wholesome seeds have manifested, keep them as long as you can in the conscious mind. Don't allow them straight away to go back into seed-form. Because the longer you keep the wholesome seeds in the conscious mind, the stronger their roots will become. For instance, if you are planting tulips or onions, the longer the leaves and the flowers exist above the earth, the stronger the bulb becomes under the earth. Once the bulb is strong, then the flowers will easily appear. So the four right efforts, we can understand in terms of the tenth breathing. The eleventh breathing is to concentrate the mind. Concentrating the mind means: the mental formation which is present, we need take mindfulness in order to embrace it and keep it alive for a time. When there is mindfulness, there will be concentration. When we continue to embrace a mental formation with mindfulness, then we already, naturally, have concentration. Whether it happens to be a negative or a positive mental formation, and if we can embrace it for a time, we will quite naturally be able to look deeply into its basis, its nature. And when we look into its nature we have wisdom or insight. Concentration here is the beginning of insight. (Thay in English:) 'Breathing in I concentrate on the mental formation that is in me.' Breathing in I embrace the mental formation in me with the energy of mindfulness and concentration. I do not run away from it. I take it as an object, just as a researcher is aware of the object of his research or like a student doing mathematics exercise allows his concentration to embrace the mathematics. If we watch the television and try to do the mathematics at the same time, we will not be successful. We haven't got enough mindfulness and concentration to do the work. We have to put ourselves into a situation of concentration in order to be able to look in our mental formation of anxiety, sadness, jealousy, loneliness... And these things make us suffer. So we need to embrace them. Because we have the opposite tendency. We see that this is not comfortable and so we want to run away from it. But here we embrace it. We are determined. We are going to work with it. We have to use mindfulness and concentration to embrace it. If we don't embrace it, look into it, there is not way we can be liberated from it. In Vietnam there is a teacher, he is quite intelligent, but his life is not happy. He has an obstruction. He is intelligent, he has studied a great deal, he has many people who respect and love him, but he has been taught in an idea and he can not let go of it. He thinks that he is the best teacher. And he cannot bear the thought that there is a teacher who is better than him. And that idea has reasons for it. Because even when he was a baby novice , people praised him as being very intelligent. And when he was in the middle school, he was the top of the class and he was extraordinary. He passed his degree with extraordinary merit or something… Many people praised him as the best and that is what has destroyed him. Gradually the idea that he is the best, nobody is as good as him, has become an obstacle. He cannot accept the idea anybody could be better than him. So he is suffering. Now he has become an upadyaya but he is still suffering. He has jealousy, irritation, because the idea that he is better than others is the root of his suffering. And he cannot see that. From the outside we see it so easily that he only has to give up the idea that he is the best. He is like everybody else. He doesn't have to be number one. But as far as he is concerned, it's very difficult. Because he doesn't have the courage to look and see that this is the root of his suffering… thinking that he is number one. And we can see quite clearly that all he has to do is let go of that idea that he is the best. He doesn't have to be number one, he can just be like everyone else and he would be happy. But his whole life he has not been able to do that, to let go of that idea. And in us… there are monks and nuns among us who are not quoting that idea, who can see that I am a nun among other nuns, I am a monk among other monks, I don't have to be any special and therefore we are very happy, easily happy. Concentrating the mind means practicing to embrace the mental formation, so we can look deeply at it. And when we can look into it and recognize it and see it is the root of our suffering, then we can let go of it and we will be liberated. That is what is meant by liberating the mind. Breathing in I am liberating, releasing my mental formation, I'm breathing out and I'm releasing my mental formation. Because my mental formation is a rope binding me… maybe the rope of craving, maybe the rope of hatred, maybe the rope of suspicion, maybe the rope of pride. These are ropes which bind us, bind our body and our mind, make our life unhappy. When we can look deeply at them and embrace them and undo them, then we have the happiness called liberating the mind. Liberating the mind means, I am able to undo, as I breath in, the mental formations… I can liberate them by undoing the rope which they are. Mental formation, here, is an affliction. For instance … our younger sister is always talking to Thay about us, to Thay, telling tales…, younger brother is always telling tales about me, I never tell tales about him. This makes us suffer. We make ourselves suffer by having that thought. So we have to sit down and we have to undo that rope which is binding us. And then our mind will be liberated. We have to call our mental formations by their name. We have to call it craving. We have to call it pride, suspicion, wrong view… These are all the unwholesome mental formations such as listed in the list. So we do not allow these unwholesome mental formations to be ropes binding us. We have to look deeply at them, by recognizing them and then we will be concentrated on them and then we feel that we are liberated from them. We know that these four breathings concerned with the mental formations of the mind are very important. We shouldn't say 'oh yes I can do that'. There is much more to learn about them. There are forty-nine mental formations and it is a large practice for us to do. Whenever one of them arises, we should be able to qualify its name and we have to bear what discovers … the causes for its arising. This monk I talked about in Vietnam, who thinks he's the best, is not fortunate because he was too successful too young and people were taken in by his capacity and they worshiped him like a god. And that is what destroyed him, made him think that he is number one… and therefore he's suffering. He cannot accept that anybody can be better than him. And he is a Buddhist. How can you think that a Buddhist could be like that, because Buddhists are not meant to have an idea of self. Even though he is an upadyaya. Even if he makes miracles… he can perform miracles, he won't be successful in his practice. Because you should be able to be happy whether you're number ten… you don't have to be number one (because we're ten…). These twelve breathings have to be developed. We have to practice and we have to present our experience of the practice to others and help people who come after us know how to practice. These sixteen breathings are to help us… need to be developed. Breathing in I am aware of the mental formation which is present in me. I recognize it, simply recognize it, saying here is, you are called craving and I know you. (Thay in English:) '… craving, I know it. Hello, good morning.' The second breathing, if it is suspicion, you say… (Thay in English:) 'Hello there, I know you are the mental formation called suspicion. … I know you. Your are an old friend of mine… and laugh…' I have known you for a long time… that is recognizing the mental formation. And you should know how to recognize. Whenever you have a mental formation you should say hello to it. Don't allow it to come and go without being recognized, it's very important. Number ten is gladdening our mind. That is allowing the seeds of happiness arise every day, nourish them by Dharma talks, by practice, by walking meditation, by breathing, by reading the sutra… These are wholesome seeds and they need to manifest every day. Number eleven is that I concentrate on my mental formation. I've recognized it, but I don't allow it to go. I sit with it, I embrace it and I concentrate on it. (Thay in English:) 'Breathing in I focus my awareness and attention on my mental formation, I embrace dearly, I embrace deeply the mental formation that is in me.' And if there is concentration, there will follow, naturally, liberation. (Thay in English:) 'Breathing in I am liberating myself from this mental formation. Breathing out I am transforming this mental formation in order to liberate myself.' This is not something vague, up in the sky, under the earth. It's not a matter of prayer, this is a matter of practice, daily practice.' Now let's go on to the four breathings concerned with the dharmas, perceptions. We are able to destroy the wrong perceptions with the last four breathings. These four last breathings are connected with the third skandha, the skandha of perceptions. This is the first time I have talked about the four last breathings in forms of perception, the skandha of perception. The thirteenth breathing is awareness of impermanence. We have a number of ignorances. We have a number of blocks of ignorance. We think that things are always there. We think our body is permanent, our mind is permanent. We act as if we are going to be here for millions of years, we're eternal. We have heard the Buddha teach, we have heard our teacher tell us about impermanence, we have read the sutra about impermanence, we have intelligence and we know that the very most we can live is a hundred years. But we only know that superficially, only accept that superficially. But deep down there is something which always thinks that we will live forever, we are indestructible. That person, we think, has had a car accident, that person is in a hospital, that person has cancer, that person has died. But we don't think that it's us. We have that kind of foolishness. Therefore our insight into impermanence is

very superficial. We just see it as an idea, as a theory. And then we act in our daily life as if we were going always to be there… and our friends and our brothers and sisters are always there, Plum Village is always there, Thay is always there. But that isn't true. It's not like that. Our life is like a flash of lightning, like clouds in the sky… So we have to concentrate, we have to look deeply into impermanence, to see with every step and every breath, every mouthful of food… in terms of impermanence. And the impermanence, here, is not negative, is not pessimistic … it's the truth and we have to understand it deeply. It also means no self. Because impermanence is essential for life. If things are not impermanent, there will be no life. For example, we want to plant sunflowers. If the sunflowers are to grow, there has to be impermanence. Because if we sow the seed of a sunflower and the sunflower seed is to stay the seed the whole time, there will be no sunflower. But the sunflower seed has to disappear in order to become the flower… that is impermanence. And the sunflower has to grow old and die in order for there to be seeds for the new sunflowers. It's very necessary for life. Don't say 'I don't like impermanence'. Because if you don't like impermanence, you don't like life. So therefore, don't think that impermanence is negative, is pessimistic, it is the basis of life. And impermanence means no self, because as far as time is concerned, we talk about impermanence and as far as space is concerned, we talk about no self. 'No self' is just another word for impermanence at least in the spatial element. It's the same thing. As far as time is concerned it's called impermanence, as far as space is concerned it's called 'no self'. Because there is nothing that can continue to be the same for two seconds. We breathe in and we breathe out, and we are different than we were before. When we breathe in, we are bringing so many different elements into ourselves. And the seeds are for carbon dioxide and oxygen, that you breathe out, other people will breathe in. That is the body breath. As far as other things are concerned it's the same. We inter-are. We are always affecting each other, we are always transmitting things to each other with every moment. And there is nothing that continues to be the same as it was two seconds ago. So impermanence means 'no self'. Nothing is definite, everything is changing. Impermanence and 'no self' are two aspects of life. And if you can see impermanence and 'no self', you can see interbeing and you can see emptiness and then, afterwards, you will have insight, you will have awakening and you will have peace. Because you have been able to look deeply into impermanence. And because you don't really know what impermanence is, you complain about it like the gatha which says"angry with someone in the ultimate dimension". We don't want to look at the other person we are angry with, we want to punish the other person. But according to this gatha we have to close our eyes and breathe and ask ourselves: 'Three hundred years from now, where will I be and where will you be.' And we see how foolish we are to be angry and want to blame that person, we want to open our arms and embrace that person, because the other person's presence is so precious in the present moment. Thanks to seeing impermanence, angry with each other in the ultimate, then mentions 'I close my eyes and look deeply, three hundred years from now, where will I be and where will you be?' That is the fruit of looking into impermanence: see we know that tomorrow we don't know whether we will still be here and therefore we want to do something today to make the other person happy. We cannot wait until tomorrow. Have you heard the story about going on a picnic? There was one monk and his disciple, they lived together and the disciple said: 'Teacher, why don't we go for a picnic on the hill?'

The disciple really wanted to go on a picnic with his teacher, but his teacher was terribly busy, I don't know why he was so busy but he was. And therefore the disciple said, "how can we have enough time to go on a picnic together?" The teacher said, "Yes I'm sure there will be, but after two months." But after six months they still hadn't been on a picnic, and several years later they still had not been on a picnic, and the disciple gave up. He said, "My teacher is always busy, he's either on the telephone, or driving the car, or sending us fax, he is always doing something ". One day the two had to go out to the town together and there was a traffic jam, the teacher said, "disciple why don't you go faster?" and the disciple said, "Oh!, because there's a traffic jam, they're all going on a picnic." Because their whole life they have been so busy and now they have the opportunity to go on a picnic so they are doing that. So the reason why the teacher was unable to go on a picnic was because he wasn't able to see the impermanence of life.

The novices in the New Hamlet go on a picnic every Monday, I think it is very intelligent, because they're not waiting. So if it is possible, we should go on a picnic every day, every hour, to be happy. Whatever we can do to make ourselves happy and to make the people we love happy we should do today, and that is the insight into impermanence, and that gives us the capacity to live and to practice diligently to be liberated. Impermanence gives us the capacity to be able to let go, and once we let go we feel light, we feel liberated. The insight into impermanence gives us hope because nothing is always going to be like that, everything can be changed. Therefore the insight into impermanence is very important, the insight into impermanence leads to the insight into no-self, which leads to the insight into interbeing. And that can take us into the Avatamsaka realm, and we can live in the light, the world of no birth and no death.

The fourteenth breathing: Breathing in I am looking deeply into the 'not-worthy of being desired' nature of all dharmas, this is called 'viraga', not having attachment and desire for something. We should know that things are the objects of our perceptions, this board is the object of our perception, this plant is the object of our perception, and all these objects, these dharmas, are impermanent. That bait is something we are running after, but it is not worthy of our desire. We are ignorant and therefore we think that that bait is the object of our desire. We have to look deeply, carefully, into the nature of that object in order to see that it is not worthy of our running after it. This means 'the nature of not being worthy of our desire', we have to understand this breathing. When we throw down some bait into the river we know that in that bait is a hook, and we hope we will deceive the fish. The fish is just like a child, it just wants to eat, so we don't have to take a real bait, we can just make a bait out of plastic, and when we hook this plastic bait onto the hook the naive fish thinks that its a real worm. If it knew how to look into the non-desirable nature of things, it would see the hook lying in the bait, and it would see the nature of 'not being worthy of being desired', not being worthy of being run after.

That is how we have to translate this breathing, it is not talking about our mind, it's talking about the things outside our mind, they're not worth desiring. The Buddha said there are five kinds of sensual desire, the desire for possessions and money, sex, fame, and good food. I don't know how many of us have suffered because of our desire for tasty food, we eat something because it tastes good, but we suffer a lot from it afterwards. We suffer because we swallow these four kinds of bait, and when we are suffering so much we begin to see that these things and were not worthy of our desire. The Buddha teaches us in the Sutras, he gave many examples about sensual desire, for example sensual desire is like a torch that we hold against the wind, the flame blows back and burns us. It is like a bone without flesh, which the dogs gnaws day and night, but gets no nourishment from it. The Buddha gave many examples like that for us to be able to see that the bait is not worthy of our desire, we suffer because we run after it. After we have looked deeply into impermanence we can look deeply into the non-desirable nature of the things we desire, because they bring hardship and suffering with them. So we have to be determined not to run after them. The Buddha said there was someone very thirsty and they went into a room and saw some pink water which smelled very fragrant, and somebody said, "Don't drink that, you will die if you drink it." The other person said, "If you just take a little lime juice then it will help you, but don't drink the pink water. But the person drinks the pink water and then they die, and this is the hardship, the misfortune, of desire. We have to see that these five sensual objects are not worthy of being run after. We have to keep reminding ourselves using the words of the Sutras and the reminders of the Sangha. If we live on our own without Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha we will easily lose ourselves on the path of running after the five sensual desires.

We should ask people who have suffered from running after the five sensual desires, to tell us about their suffering. It is a very good way to do it, because people suffer a great deal because of their attachment to the five sensual desires. We should ask them to come and talk to us about these things. If you haven't yet stepped into that realm of suffering you think that this is a good place to go, so you should ask someone who has been there to tell you about it. Often there are meditation students who come to Plum Village who have suffered greatly because of sense desires. We only have to listen to their suffering and their running after the happiness of sense desires, and we will be able to look deeply and feel very happy that we have not yet stepped into that realm.

The fifteenth breathing: I am breathing and looking into the no birth, no death nature of all dharmas, nirodha also means nirvana, means no birth and no death. So now we have gone deep into the subject of our meditation, once we have understood impermanence and the non-desirable nature of things then we come to nirodha, that is the silencing, the extinction, of birth and death. In the beginning we see that things are born and they die, they have a beginning and they have an end, they have a being and a non-being. But because we can look deeply into impermanence and no-self we can discover the ultimate dimension

where there is no birth and no death. At first we see the leaf is born and dies, it is and it is not, and if we look deeply into impermanence and no-self we can be in touch with the no birth and no death nature of the leaf. We see the leaf is like a Buddha, indeed it is not born and it does not die, it does not exist and it does not fail to exist, and we are the same, we also participate in the no birth, no death realm. The greatest duty of a monk, a nun, or a practitioner, is to go beyond the world of birth and death and participate in the world of no birth and no death. Because birth and death are just ideas of birth and death, the Heart Sutra teaches us that there is no birth and no death, nothing defiled and nothing immaculate. This is one of the Sutras that can help us go beyond the ideas of 'is' and 'is not', so that we can be in touch with the ultimate dimension where there is not the many and the one, and that is that world of nirvana, that is the aim of our practice to see no birth and no death. We have opened the door of no birth and no death, no coming and no going, we have opened the door of the ultimate dimension, and we are unshakable and free. Therefore the fifteenth breathing is to help us step into world of the ultimate dimension, and then we can go beyond birth and death. Therefore the Sutra on mindfulness of breathing takes us very far. There are people who despise me saying I just teach breathing in and breathing out. But in fact breathing in and out according to the Anapanna Sutra takes us a very long way. When they see in every retreat I just teach people how to breathe in and breathe out, they look down on me and they say, "Well he doesn't teach anything deep and wonderful, he just teaches breathing in and breathing out.

The sixteenth breathing. : Breathing in and contemplating letting go, releasing. Master Tang Hoi talks about the action of the hearer. If you cannot let go you cannot be liberated, you let go of your ideas about birth, about death, about exists and does not exist. Whatever ideas are making you suffer, you have to let go of them and then you wont suffer. Like the teacher who thinks he is number one, he just has to let go of that and he will be happy straight away. We have a suspicion, but if we can let go of our suspicion we will be happy straight away. We have the idea that this body is me, and if we can let go of that we will stop fearing straight away. We have an idea that 70 years is our life span, and if we can let go of that we will become deathless. We think that we have a separate self, our happiness is not the happiness of the other, and the happiness of the other is not our happiness. That idea of self stops us from being happy, we have to let go of ideas of self, of human being, of living being, and of life span. If we can let go of those ideas we can let go of everything, because if we are caught in any idea we will not be happy, and once we let go of that idea we will be happy. Whether that idea is the idea of success or the idea of happiness, look again into your own mind, have you ideas about success - you want to be like this, like that, you think that you will be happy when you get that decree or when you marry that person. You have to be number one to be happy, you will die because of ideas like that, . So take that idea of happiness away, embrace it and look deeply into it, and you know that when you can let go of that idea you will be happy.

Master Tang Hoi said that there are two things we have to let go of in order to be liberated; that is the idea of this body, that this body is me, and the idea of a life span, this is the length of life I'll have. We have to let go of those two ideas. They both lay in the Vajracchedika Sutra, the first is this body is me, many of us are caught in this idea, this body is me. If you look at this leaf, it says 'this body is me', it does not know that it is already existing in the tree. The leaf is a very small part of it, and sooner or later the leaf will become part of the tree. It looks beautiful and we want to press it in a book, but the book will be destroyed and so will the leaf, and the leaf will go back to the tree. 'This body is me', that is called the body of view. The body view, that means we see that this body is me, once we can give up that idea we will be happy, we will not be afraid. This stage of life is me and I was born in 19 so and so, and I will die in 2000 so and so, and I just exist for that amount of time, that is the idea of a life span. We cannot see ourselves before that or after that, that is ignorance, we have to let go of that idea of life span. That is why Master Tang Hoi said that we have to let go of the idea of body and life span. So the sixteenth breathing is very powerful practice of letting go of ideas, as soon as you can let go of your ideas you can be happy and secure.

This leaf is the skeleton of a bodhi leaf, I don't know if when the leaf is sees it's skeleton it's afraid, but I think that it is very beautiful, so that is why I pressed it in a book. We have a skeleton like the leaf does and our skeleton can be beautiful too, so we have to look deeply in order to see that our skeleton is like the leaf, why are we so afraid when we see a skeleton? So I said to the brothers and sisters, "Please go and buy a skeleton, which we can hang up in the meditation hall, and we can come and join our palms before it and say "Hello skeleton". We have to see our own skeleton at the same time, we should be able to look at the skeleton and feel as normal and happy as we do when we look at the skeleton of this leaf, why do we discriminate? We are like the leaf, the leaf has a skeleton and we have a skeleton, why can't we look at the skeleton of a human being the way we look at the skeleton of a leaf. So please have one hanging up in your room as well, so when you wake up in the morning you will see the skeleton and you will get used to it, and it will finish your ignorance about skeletons. If you are living in a room with a skeleton hanging up day and night, what will be left for you to be afraid of. You've got a skeleton in yourself already, so why are you afraid of a skeleton outside yourself, it's very strange? So the reality is that we have a block of ignorance, and we have to educate that block of ignorance. Our practice is to look at our skeleton, whether it is the present skeleton or the future skeleton, in the same way that we look at a leaf. A leaf falls very gracefully and our life is like that too, the time when we change our body into another form. We have to see our skeleton is as beautiful as the leaf skeleton and there's nothing to be terrified of or afraid of. Has anyone ordered a skeleton yet? Please order one so we can hang it up in the meditation hall, and anyone who wants to borrow the skeleton and hang up in his or her room will be able to.

"So if the method of mindfulness of breathing is practiced in this way, according to these instructions it will be rewarding and of great benefit." I have translated it from Chinese, so you can compare the Chinese version which is in the Samyukta Agama with the Pali version. The order of the 16 breathings in the Chinese version is rather different from that of the Pali version, because #14 is letting go rather than #16. I think it is more correct in the Chinese, because to have letting go before you have the awareness of birthlessness and deathlessness is better. So you should all have a copy of the Chinese as well as the Pali in order to compare them.

In May we will have a retreat of 21 days in North America. In those twenty-one days we will just study the Sutra on mindfulness of breathing, and in that retreat we will go deeper because we have 21 days, whereas here we only have two or three dharma talks, and next Sunday we will finish talking about this Sutra.

Anyone here who has been a teacher in a French school will probably know where we can order a skeleton.